

Communication for the 21st Century

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As a professional speaker, it is always exhilarating to step to the platform and meet my audience, whether it is a large convention gathering or a much smaller training group. As I face the gathering before me, I am always amazed at what a "United Nations look" audiences today have—a collage of color and nationalities.

There's also a great gender and age mix. People's ages are reflected in the bright puppies, newly born to the corporate world, who are seated next to tested lions and lioness with white manes (or seriously graying, at any rate!). But it's hard to know who's rank and who's file these days—or even what those terms mean.

The work force of today and into the 21st Century has a definite profile. Understanding the characteristics of that work force is the first step in becoming powerful, effective communicators. People respond in communication not only as individuals but as products of their time and circumstances.

The workers of today's business world are the most educated the world has ever had. Not only are academic levels higher, but education continues to become more available and accessible. Continuing education and training is an integral part of many companies. Because change—in terms of both knowledge and technology—is the rule, not the exception, educational needs must continually be met.

Education has also reached an amazing level on an informal basis. Hundreds of cable channels will reach into homes in the very near future. Computers are becoming as common as toasters in homes, with our children outstripping most of us in their grasp of computer potential. CD-ROMs and the vast computer information highway can direct minds in a multiplicity of directions.

How does this impact communication? Educated people are accustomed to being asked for input rather than being told what to do.

This is coupled with the fact that most of today's work force has never been involved in a military environment—never served in the armed forces with its "yes, sir" attitude. American workers today look for a responsiveness from managers and coworkers to their own ideas and ways of doing things.

People today have more legal rights than ever before and expect to use them and to be protected by them. Further, people in the work force know how to use them. The worker of today extends the entire concept of rights to the dignity of the individual—the work force today looks for ethical and moral leadership and a sense of unity and cooperation among workers.

The work force today is composed of great diversity. America itself is a tossed salad, not a melting pot. Races, cultures and ethnic groups are mixed together with each retaining its own identity. Communication asks for a knowledge and understanding of others' life-styles, backgrounds and thinking.

Men and women's roles are in flux. Communication works best when gender communication differences are understood. When men and women learn from each other's communication strengths, rather than build on the negatives, gender communication can be a great learning process.

- 1. Understand emotion and vulnerability:** The world ahead will become more and more people-centered with an emphasis on human rights and dignity. Messages based on sincerity and genuineness of feeling, using meaningful thoughts and vivid examples, will create the most powerful impact in communication.

Intimacy, well thought out and used with care, allows a side-by-side, peer dialogue that fosters a much faster, more sincere form of communication.

- 2. Communicate by example:** As a role model and coach, people will be as you are, not as you say they should be. Walking the talk is motivation in its purest form.

21st Century communication will become easier in some respects—just look at e-mail, fax and the information highway—and harder in the sense that the constant change characterizing the new era will force us to think and communicate at an accelerated level. Even positive change can be disruptive and can break down communication lines. How you react to new ways of thinking and working—your "flexibility factor"—is directly related to powerful communication.

People whose lives are out of balance or do not understand the need for balance in those around them do not create an environment for good communication.

Balance in life is role modeled by how we choose to deal with both professional and personal attitudes and beliefs. The boundary between an individual's private and public life is a tenuous one. It is easier to understand and work with the connection than to try to break the interaction.

- 3. Any input needs a response:** With all the "quickie communication" available to us, which will only increase in the century ahead, an emphasis on response is critical. Follow-up to a phone call, request, suggestion or completion of assigned work assures that someone is listening.

Find other's "buttons" and encourage them to dialogue. According to experts, 80 percent of a business day is spent in communication. 45 percent of it is spent in listening. An effective manager should spend 60 percent of the day listening.

Build silence into life. Noise creates constant stress for our bodies, affecting immune systems and health. Begin turning volumes down at work and home. We should create opportunities for ourselves and others for silence.

- 4. Help others see the total picture:** Communication today and into the next century will need to address the continuing demand of workers to know what the

total organizational picture is, what is happening to others in the organization and how they are impacted. Tell them! What's the big secret? Why not operate in the bright, dazzling light of day? Here it is and this is how it works!

Support organized brainstorming and team/consensus building. It takes pressure off any one individual, increases productivity and creates "us" projects.

- 5. Acquire and develop knowledge:** It is difficult to be true communicators in today's world and the world of the 21st Century without acknowledging that the base of all communication is knowledge. As we move to the next century, knowledge will be accelerated. The steps we take now to explore our world—understanding how others think and feel, knowing what is happening around us in all areas of knowledge—will determine the clarity and quality with which we communicate.

Education today is available in an astounding array of mediums, vehicles and means. It is within the reach of all of us to extend our vocabularies, our minds and our universe.

True communication is the world of the adventurer, confronting new things, seeking to enlarge territory, wanting to expand knowledge, eager to deepen understanding.